

STYLE AND CONTEXT IN KURT WEILL'S AMERICAN SONGS

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## ABSTRACT

History tends to divide Kurt Weill's legacy into two main categories: his Berlin operatic collaborations with Bertolt Brecht and his Broadway musicals. However, Weill's stylistic eras are far more complex and subdivided, encompassing his late Romantic roots, the "high" modernism which found its pinnacle in his studies with Busoni, the German ballad style cultivated in *Dreigroschenoper* and *Mahagonny*, the smoother cabaret style of his time in France and London, and the jazzy musical style that found firm footing in *Lady in the Dark* and beyond. While generally these styles were isolated and chronologically/geographically oriented in Weill's life, all are seen in the non-theatrical songs written after his immigration to the United States in 1935. Because these works have no specific character, script, or collaborators to be molded around, Weill here displays uncharacteristic freedom in the combination of his styles and the contexts in which he chooses to present them. The manipulation of these styles reveals a composer negotiating his evolving musical identity. The stylistic markings of each song are intrinsically linked to the way Weill views its poet, intended audience, message, and singer - all through the lens of contexts in which he had used those styles in the past. This study approaches these works from the perspective of a music historian, music theorist, and singer.



## **Part I: Introduction**

Composer Kurt Weill is best remembered for his stage works. His legacy resides primarily in the edgy German operas of his Weimar days and the Broadway musicals of the last fifteen years of his life. Between those two halves of Weill's career, however, was the most tumultuous period in his life: his forced emigration from Nazi-occupied Germany to Paris in 1933, and ultimately to the United States in 1935. During this time, it was in fact his lesser-known non-theatrical songs that helped publicly cement his role as an active member of his new society and privately learn to assimilate to a new environment.

In his independently written American songs, Weill drew from the styles and genres he used for songs throughout his compositional development: his earliest classically based art songs which bled into the realm of Modernism, his popular Berlin ballads, his French chansons, and his most recent Broadway hit tunes. Although most of these songs were written in just one year (1942), they are ostensibly a stylistic cross-section of Weill's approach to song across his entire life. Weill manipulated his past styles and genres in remarkable ways based on his chosen context, audience, and singer. Their styles served as not only a means of adjusting to his new American life, but as a way of dealing with Germany's sudden shift from homeland to enemy in an activist way matched by no other composer of his generation.

By one calculation, 465 musicians emigrated from Germany or Austria to the United States during Hitler's rule;<sup>1</sup> another study estimates 1,500 musicians moved from

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<sup>1</sup> Michael H. Kater, *The Twisted Muse: Musicians and Their Music in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1997), 108.

all of Europe to the United States between 1933 and 1944.<sup>2</sup> These musicians were faced with a number of choices in their attitudes toward their new environments. Political scientist Franz Neumann once professed that an exiled professional “may (and sometimes did) abandon his previous intellectual position and accept without qualification the new orientation...Or he may (and sometimes did) retain completely his old thought structure and may either believe himself to have the mission of totally revamping the American pattern, or may withdraw (with disdain and contempt) into an island of his own...Or he may, finally, attempt an integration of his new experience with old tradition.”<sup>3</sup>

Into which of these categories did Kurt Weill belong? There is little argument that Weill’s music underwent a drastic change after his emigration. He has been described as “the paradigm of an artist who embraced immigration without reservation as absolutely positive and who integrated himself, both artistically and personally, thoroughly into his new homeland and its culture (so much so that even the term ‘immigrant’ seems no longer applicable)”<sup>4</sup> and as “the most brilliant instance of musical symbiosis...one of the most adaptable geniuses on record.”<sup>5</sup>

Others were not so pragmatic about these developments. Many of Weill's contemporaries and the earliest Weill scholars were convinced the composer’s assimilation to American culture was the result of “selling out” his artistic integrity in favor of commercialism.<sup>6</sup> A shift from “serious music” to “light entertainment,” a perceived drop in intellectualism, irony, moralizing and social critique, as well as a

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<sup>2</sup> Reinhold Brinkmann and Christoph Wolff, eds., *Driven Into Paradise: the Musical Migration from Nazi Germany to the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 21.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

perception of Weill's individual style disappearing into the foreground of American musical clichés, have all been cited as evidence that the composer simply forfeited his own voice in favor of fame, fortune, and acceptance in America.<sup>7</sup> Douglas Jarman writes: "that most of the American works are of a lower musical standard – often of a much lower standard – than Weill's European works is, I think, undeniable."<sup>8</sup> David Drew describes the shift as "self-sacrifice greater than any that would have been demanded by a totalitarian ministry of culture" and proclaims that Weill's conversion "is not attributable to any development which could be understood as normal."<sup>9</sup> When conductor Otto Klemperer was asked why Weill "went to pieces as a composer in America," his response was, "He was very interested in money, that's the reason. He got too involved in American show business and all the terrible people in it."<sup>10</sup> Musicologist Theodor Adorno's obituary of Weill referred to him as a *Musikregisseur*, defined as someone who "submits himself to artistic and, to a certain degree, political ends." According to Adorno, Weill turned this submission into a virtue in order to compensate for his "limited powers of invention," but ultimately did so "to the point of self-renunciation." The obituary concludes that Weill succumbed "to the constraints and temptations of exile."<sup>11</sup> Jarman speculates that given the circumstances of Weill's forced emigration, "one can only surmise the deep psychological and personal factors which led

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<sup>7</sup> Douglas Jarman, *Kurt Weill, an Illustrated Biography* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 132.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>9</sup> Brinkmann and Wolff, eds., 263.

<sup>10</sup> Jarman, 133.

<sup>11</sup> Brinkmann and Wolff, eds., 262.

him to cultivate this apparently deliberate anonymity” in his American compositional style.<sup>12</sup>

The most hotly contested issue in Weill scholarship in the past half century has been the delineation "Two Weills." Most preliminary biographical literature on the composer, headed by Drew,<sup>13</sup> assumed the division of a "German Weill" and "American Weill" with the inference that the latter was far inferior. Clearly, there were plenty of strong opinions to back this up. However, there seems to have been a concerted public relations effort among musicologists in the past thirty or so years to counter these perceptions by finding common threads in Weill's compositional style and approach to music theater - his "fingerprint." Kim Kowalke does an excellent job laying out this perspective with numerous examples in his article "Kurt Weill, Modernism, and Popular Culture: *Offentlichkeit als Stil*"<sup>14</sup> Claire Taylor-Jay counters in her article "The Composer's Voice? Compositional Style and Criteria of Value in Weill, Krenek, and Stravinsky," and concludes that "reclaiming the worth of the American Weill does not

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<sup>12</sup> Jarman, 138.

<sup>13</sup> Drew's original article on Kurt Weill in the New Grove Dictionary of Music even had a subheading "Two Weills," including the following passage: "While some notable artists have simply stopped creating at a certain stage in their careers and a few have put an end to their lives, Weill is perhaps the only one to have done away with his old creative self in order to make way for a new one. The pre-1934 composer had been acutely conscious of his roots and responsibilities as a German artist in post-war society; had felt himself to be a part of the modern movement and one of its leaders in the younger generation; and was accustomed to measure his talents and achievements against those of the most eminent of his German contemporaries, Paul Hindemith. The post-1940 composer was one who asserted that he had never thought of himself as a German composer, that his only roots were those he had now established in the USA, and that his responsibilities were to the American musical stage in its popular form. The composer whom he now saw as his chief rival was Richard Rodgers."

<sup>14</sup> This full article can be found online at <http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.lib.indiana.edu/journals/modernism-modernity/v002/2.1kowalke.html>. Accessed July 7, 2013.

require the composer to be seen through the lens of lifelong compositional or aesthetic consistency."<sup>15</sup>

Ultimately, each view is valid - it all depends on one's priorities. Yes, Weill's style changed significantly when he moved (and, I will argue, several times before that). And yes, one can find several similarities between his different phases of composition. But gradations of "better" or "worse" are entirely in the ears of the listener. This study does not organize the styles of Weill's song writing in order to make value judgments or count how many Weills there are. It does so in order to pinpoint what facets of each style Weill later drew upon in his independent songs, and attempt to discern his motivations. The study isolates songs written for non-theatrical purposes in the hope that this subset of Weill's work may represent the purest form of these motivations. Here, he would have no librettist, producer, director, cast, plot, character, or even audience to answer to except for those of his own choosing. It is the link between his contextual and compositional choices throughout his song-writing career that is examined here.

What most of the literature of the past fifty years lacks is a holistic approach to all of Weill's shifts throughout his life - not just the one attached to his geographical move. Studies of his style often overlook Weill's first major adaptations: from a young man heavily influenced by the Romantic Lied to a vehemently highbrow composer, and finally to the man made famous by *Mahagonny* and *Threepenny Opera*. In order to understand the changes Weill made as an American, it is necessary to examine his first changes, and what those shifts represented to Weill. The symbolic meanings of otherwise superficial musical traits shed new light on the reemergence of those traits in

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<sup>15</sup> Claire Taylor-Jay, "The Composer's Voice? Compositional Style and Criteria of Value in Weill, Krenek and Stravinsky," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 2009, 85-111, accessed June 15, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40783131>.

his later songs. We thus begin our study of the last fifteen years of his life with the first fifteen: the roots of Weill's song composition.

## PART II: ART SONGS

### Young Weill

Weill's earliest years were his most prolific as an art song composer. From the age of thirteen through his early twenties, he wrote several large-scale cycles, piano-vocal pieces, and works for voice with instrumental ensembles. We hear in these the natural offspring of the German Romantic Lied. It is easy to forget when listening to Weill's later music that his first compositions came just on the heels of *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Das Lied von der Erde*. But the young composer's teenage works have clearly soaked in these influences, as well as those of Schubert and Schumann. The motives and harmonies of "Im Volkston," written at age 16, are extremely derivative of "Die zwei blauen Augen" from Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*. The first of Weill's *Otfrah's Lieder* "In meinem Garten," written in the same year, shows shades of Schubert in its use of disparate planes of the voice and treble line of the piano, its seamless modulations, pulsing piano textures, and Romantic harmonies. The cycle expands into Straussian rolling chords with thick textures, huge contrasts, and operatic scope. By "Das schöne Kind" one year later, Weill's style had noticeably matured. The piano is treated as a more independent character with colorful extended interludes (perhaps a nod toward Schumann), and – perhaps most importantly with regards to his later works – we hear a hint of the waltz idiom. Dance idioms would become central in the majority of Weill's later successes across national styles and genres.

Overseeing these Jugendlieder were Weill's first teachers: Albert Bing, briefly followed by the faculty of the Berlin Musikhochschule including Engelbert Humperdinck. Then, in the summer of 1920, Weill applied to study with Ferruccio

Busoni. This was the first major turning point in Weill's career and compositional approach. In a few short years, Weill's songs morphed from an echo of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to full-fledged modernity. And for Busoni, modernity equated to Art intended for the Elite, written for the concert hall. "In matters of art," the mentor wrote to his biographer Gisella Selden-Goth, "my feelings are those of an autocrat. I am convinced that there has to be a great barrier between the public and a great work of art."<sup>16</sup> Weill was to eventually take quite the opposite approach. However, traces of Busoni remain throughout his life in his practices of mode mixture and his unabashed embrace of what Busoni referred to as "triviality." Weill's memories of this time seem to color himself as a rebellious, misunderstood modern artist. A notice of one recital that included two of his Lieder sung by Elisabeth Feuge, for example, reported "enthusiastic applause from a large audience." But Weill related later to a friend that the "severe modernity" of his songs had baffled the audience.<sup>17</sup>

Weill's 1921 *Rilkelieder* demonstrate a startlingly abrupt rejection of traditional tonality, incessantly repetitive dotted rhythms in the piano, thick chordal textures juxtaposed with moments of bleak austerity from song to song, and structural freedom. As Rilke struggles in his poetry to find his version of God, Weill struggles in his setting to find his version of himself. Looking back, he would regard his compositions of this time as "technical experiments which represent a grappling with new means of harmonic and melodic expression."<sup>18</sup> The singers of works in this era, particularly the cycle *Frauentanz*, require extreme accuracy and independence in pitch and rhythm, agility, and

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<sup>16</sup> Ronald Taylor, *Kurt Weill: Composer in a Divided World* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 33-34.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.



a kind of removed sense of affect. This emotional detachment would become extremely effective in his later German works, in which his ballad singers would often stoically sing of horrible events.

### **American “Art Songs”**

Weill wrote few works after his move to the United States that would be classified as “serious” or “highbrow” music the way he had in his youth. He did, however, take on two projects that most would label as such. Both took their texts from the highest caliber of American poets and mixed American popular idioms with the classically based techniques he practiced in his youth. The first, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” set the poetry of Robert Frost and was written in December 1939. This full work has been lost, but a sketch of the first twenty bars remains. In this sketch we see late Romantic harmonies, but with prominent 9<sup>th</sup> chords in the opening material – a trait we will revisit in the context of American popular music. Its accompaniment contains similar textures as the first of Weill’s *O’frah’s Lieder*, “In meinem Garten:” pulsing chords on each beat offset with an occasional ascending flourish in the left hand. The vocal line is shaped by simple sequences of descending thirds. Its phrases are repetitive and regular; we clearly see the start of a second A section at the bottom of the existing page, and can anticipate an either strophic or AABA form to follow. At the same time, Weill writes somewhat unusual 3-bar phrases throughout. Though the piece is not terribly demanding on the part of pianist or vocalist – the vocal line stays within the staff, is fairly smooth, and is given ample, comfortable breaths – its straight quarter note rhythms, legato phrasing, and arched contours seem meant for a classically trained voice. It is

quite a charming rendition of Frost's poem, beautifully depicting the serene simplicity of winter.

The second of Weill's more "serious" projects was a set of Walt Whitman songs, with texts written during the Civil War. Whitman's poems had been set by dozens of composers in the past, and were more popular than ever in the wake of WWII; Viennese refugee Hans Heinsheimer wrote in his 1947 memoir that "every composer whom the émigré conductor Max Reiter encountered in the United States was writing either the great American symphony or a monumental Whitman cantata."<sup>19</sup> To set Whitman's poetry was seen as "more of a political or moral act than an aesthetic one for a refugee from an enemy country:" a true renunciation of one's past identity. It was also a bold move practically speaking. Composers for whom English was not their first language faced challenges of American idioms, culture, and technical issues of syntax and structure in Whitman's poetry.<sup>20</sup> Many ultimately chose to set German translations of Whitman rather than the original English.<sup>21</sup>

Weill, however, was not to be cowed. Like many of his German contemporaries, he had been a fan of Whitman long before his emigration. Werner and Walter Grunzweig write that even today, "although Germans traditionally differentiate meticulously between highbrow and popular culture, the reception of Whitman frequently obliterates this distinction – proof of the American's democratizing force even in a foreign culture."<sup>22</sup>

Parallels have been drawn between Whitman's diction and that of Goethe and Rilke, both

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 199-200.

<sup>21</sup> Werner Grünzweig and Walter Grünzweig, "Eros, Expressionism, and Exile: Whitman in German Music." In *Walt Whitman and Modern Music: War, Desire, and the Trials of Nationhood*, ed. Lawrence Kramer (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 46.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 43.

of whom young Weill set at the cusp of his earliest significant art song developments.<sup>23</sup> On November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1926 (nine years before his immigration to the U.S.), Weill wrote in *Der deutsche Rundfunk* that Whitman was “the first truly original poetic talent to grow out of American soil. He was the first who discovered poetic material in the tempo of public life as well as in the landscapes of the New World...Because he openly expresses things normally kept secret, he is openly chastised.”<sup>24</sup>

Weill’s first three Walt Whitman Songs, “Oh Captain! My Captain!” “Beat! Beat! Drums!” and “Dirge for Two Veterans,” were written for Fight for Freedom, Inc. in January 1942 to boost morale after Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor.<sup>25</sup> The impending American involvement affected Weill deeply. In a letter to Ira Gershwin, he wrote: “I’ve written some orchester [sic] music but I threw it away. It seems so silly just to write music in a time like this.” He shared with Gershwin his alternative idea to write “a book of songs (not popular songs but ‘Lieder’) for concert singers.”<sup>26</sup> To his parents, Weill later wrote: “Everybody tries to help the enormous war effort in his own way. Among other things, I’ve written some songs to poems by Walt Whitman, the great American poet.”<sup>27</sup> Weill wrote these first three songs with the hope that baritone Paul Robeson would record them and sent Robeson an autographed score, but that recording never materialized.<sup>28</sup> In 1947 Weill added a fourth song, “Come Up from the Fields, Father,”

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>24</sup> Kim H. Kowalke, “‘I’m an American!’ Whitman, Weill, and Cultural Identity.” In *Walt Whitman and Modern Music: War, Desire, and the Trials of Nationhood*, ed. Lawrence Kramer (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 111.

<sup>25</sup> Drew, 320-1.

<sup>26</sup> Kowalke, “I’m an American!”, 113.

<sup>27</sup> Brinkmann and Wolff, 202.

<sup>28</sup> Farneth, Juchem, and Stein, 209.

and tenor William Horne recorded all four for Concert Hall Records.<sup>29</sup> The date of their orchestration is unknown.<sup>30</sup>

Weill scholars have long been divided on where to place the Whitman songs. David Drew contends that the set's populist purpose negates its serious nature. He declares (quite contrary to Weill's own writings) that the pieces "are clearly not intended as 'art songs' in the European sense."<sup>31</sup> Jürgen Thym alternatively declares that "the Whitman settings are not what in German would be called 'songs' but what in English would be called 'Lieder.'" <sup>32</sup> The sophistication of the piano accompaniments and the subtleties in the way Weill sets Whitman's complex poetic structures go far beyond the simple tunes he wrote in the American and German propaganda songs to be discussed. Thym does concede that Weill wrote these art songs with American idioms in mind, such as the "boogie-woogie chords" in "Dirge for Two Veterans and the Broadway-esque harmonies of "Oh Captain! My Captain!"<sup>33</sup> Kowalke considers the paradox of both opinions, examining the salient musical traits of the work through the lens of Weill's intention to write a book of self-defined "Lieder for concert singers."

...[T]he Whitman Songs are hybrids, negotiating the notoriously ill-defined boundaries between 'serious' and 'popular,' 'high' and 'low,' 'cultivated' and 'vernacular,' 'European' and 'American,' 'autonomous' and 'occasional.' Not 'rousing' enough to be patriotic anthems, not 'folklike' enough to be baubles of Americana, and not 'arty' enough to stand next to sets of Schumann and Brahms, they have recently generated more controversy than performances...Though indeed requiring 'concert singers,' they still seem ill-at-ease on the recital or symphonic platform, too aware of their 'melting pot' origins, too self-conscious of their 'otherness'.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>30</sup> Drew, 320-1.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Kowalke and Edler, 292.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Kowalke, "I'm an American!", 118-119.

The Whitman songs' intended interpreter is also an intriguing clue to its categorization. Paul Robeson was really the ideal mouthpiece for a hybrid populist/highbrow work. As the star of *Show Boat* – one of the rare subset of musicals that seems to be found more frequently in opera houses than Broadway – as well as a serious Shakespearean actor, movie star, and outspoken political representative of the populist movement, Robeson bridged at least as many categories and genres of artistic expression as Weill. His voice was a robust, operatic bass-baritone. Though he scooped quite a bit in some of his extant recordings, he used vibrato consistently and did not “croon” the way his contemporaries like Bing Crosby or Al Jolson did. Robeson used his full voice with crisp, precise diction: two clear requirements for Weill's Whitman settings. It is easy to listen to his persuasively populist, operatically-sung “Ballad of Americans” and understand why Weill felt Robeson could effectively sell his Whitman songs as an American morale-booster.

Unfortunately, the purposes of propaganda do not seem to coincide with Whitman's own ambivalence toward war and the seriousness of these poems' overarching tone. Where the American and German propaganda songs written for factory workers and radio listeners appealed to a populist class with the directness of their message and music, the Whitman Songs clearly have deeper intentions and are meant for a more cultured audience. It is possible that this is one reason Paul Robeson never recorded the songs, and in fact why no one at all recorded them until after the war was over<sup>35</sup> – their subject was so serious and painful, it may have actually been detrimental to

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<sup>35</sup> Helen Hayes recorded a spoken rendition of “Beat! Beat! Drums!” on a recording of patriotic recitations for RCA Victor, with Weill playing his music for the song underneath, soon after he composed the Three Whitman Songs in 1942. Thym

the war effort. Thym concludes, “Created (however impractically) for propaganda purposes during the war, Weill’s Whitman settings had to wait until after the fighting was over to find their full resonance.”<sup>36</sup>

In their 1942 form, the Whitman settings consisted of 1) Oh Captain! My Captain! 2) Beat! Beat! Drums! and 3) Dirge for Two Veterans.

### **Oh Captain! My Captain!**

“Oh Captain! My Captain!” takes the listener through recent victory into the realization that the captain of the ship – for Whitman, Abraham Lincoln – has “fallen cold and dead” on deck, unable to enjoy the fruits of his sacrifice. Weill’s setting takes the listener through this trajectory by blending light, popular idioms into increasingly complex, classically based compositional techniques. The first twenty bars of the piece could have been drawn from any number of Weill’s popular Broadway works. The piano begins with a cabaret-style motive of jazzy harmonies and swung dotted rhythms. The voice contrasts with a line of straight quarters and eighths and basic arpeggiations in its melody. Kowalke points out similarities between this material and the bridge section of “Johnny’s Song” at the end of Weill’s earlier musical *Johnny Johnson*. There, the lyrics read “And we’ll never lose our faith and hope and trust for all mankind. We’ll work and strive while we’re alive that better way to find.”<sup>37</sup>

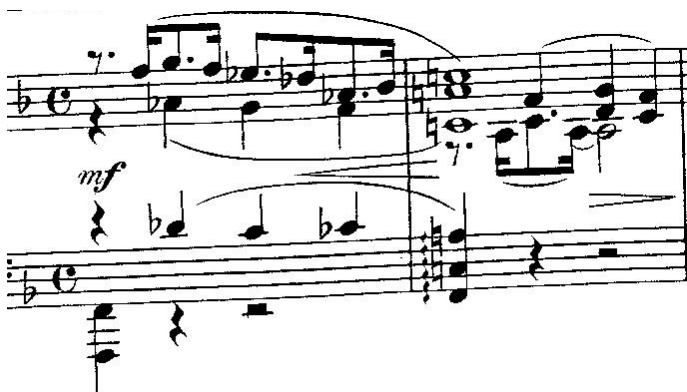
Figure 1: Opening motive of “Oh Captain! My Captain!”

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describes the song in this context as a “concluding salvo in a barrage of patriotic sentimentality and emotional manipulation” (*A Stranger Here Myself*, 294).

<sup>36</sup> Kim H. Kowalke and Horst Edler, eds., 294.-5

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 119.



The rhythmic motion suddenly stops on “Oh heart! heart! heart!,” paired with a dynamic shift from *mf* to *p*, pared-down accompanimental texture, and longer note values for both voice and piano. Tonally, the piece shifts from a clear-cut F Major to ambiguous tonicizations of several keys: Weill is very literally interpreting the shift in poetry from celebration to uncertainty. “Where on the deck my captain lies” introduces the second piano motive:

Figure 2: Second piano motive, “Oh Captain! My Captain!”



Here, this motive is pianissimo; at the end of the second verse this motive grows to piano, and by the final line of the piece it is forte.

The second strophe begins with the same F Major cabaret motive as the beginning, and the vocal line is essentially the same as the first strophe. However, as soon as the voice enters, the piano undergoes drastic shifts towards the classical idiom. The dotted rhythms are eradicated completely, as are the straightforward major

harmonies. Instead, we have heavy five-part chords and increased chromaticism. In the second half of the strophe, we have the same shift in dynamics and tone as we did for “Oh heart! heart! heart!”. But Weill has added more complex counterpoint to the piano line – again, a classical tendency seen in his earlier Lieder.

The most drastic shift occurs in the following interlude: the dotted cabaret rhythm returns, but at this point the harmonies have mutated beyond recognition. The dread of the narrator is fully apparent in their dissonance and in the low half step trills of the bass, perhaps intended to emulate drum-rolls. Where the vocal line of the A sections had simple subdominant ascending arpeggiations, the descending arpeggiations here each end with an unexpected tritone, and it is suddenly unclear what key they imply. Tension builds with repeated motives in free form, culminating in the final forte return of the *pesante* piano motive. The last four bars give the piano the final word - the same opening cabaret motive, but beginning in F minor instead of F major, and ending with a tone cluster. The last three chords fade from accented fortissimo to pianissimo. Though it is common for song composers to include piano postludes, Weill seems to give his significant messages as reactions to the text – a trend we will see in most of his song genres.

To some, the mixture of popular elements into the Whitman settings, “undercuts the sobriety of the lyrics” when compared to settings by Vaughan Williams or Holst, and provides “dissentient counterparts to the poet’s mournful pathos.”<sup>38</sup> Others complain that “Oh Captain! My Captain!” “wears its show-business costume uneasily,” resulting in an

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<sup>38</sup> John M. Picker, “‘Red War is my Song’: Whitman, Higginson, and Civil War Music.” In *Walt Whitman and Modern Music: War, Desire, and the Trials of Nationhood*, ed. Lawrence Kramer (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 8.



“uneasy hybrid.”<sup>39</sup> But the cabaret elements contrasted with the classical provide yet another tool for transition between joyous and distressed tones in Whitman’s poetry – also, between the style of Weill’s earliest art songs and the style he was perfecting in more public stage works. In the beginning of the piece, the unadulterated joy of the victorious sailors is represented by the simple musical idiom of American popular culture. But that style gradually melts away (or is obscured, depending on one’s perspective) to reveal the darker, more serious, and much more complex realities represented by a style Weill had long since abandoned in his most public works.

### **Beat! Beat! Drums!**

Weill’s early mentor Ferruccio Busoni once commented on the “uncivilized, fanatical tone” of Whitman’s “Beat! Beat! Drums!”<sup>40</sup> Weill’s setting of it, like many of his peers’, focuses on the onomatopoetic nature of the text and its “obsessive iambic-anapestic meter;”<sup>41</sup> many parallels could be drawn from his setting to Vaughan Williams’s and Hindemith’s in terms of rhythmic choices and general contour.<sup>42</sup> Kim Kowalke writes that “Weill’s assertion that ‘every text I’ve composed looks entirely different once it’s been swept through my music’ does not seem to apply to his Whitman songs.”<sup>43</sup> Whitman’s text already has so much emotional charge built into it that certain musical interpretations appear to be almost mandatory. The emphatic quarter notes of the opening text ending on a lower, longer note on “Drums!” for example, or the triplets of

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<sup>39</sup> Kowalke, “I’m an American!”, 121.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 288.

<sup>41</sup> Reinhold Brinkmann and Christoph Wolff, eds., 203.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 203-4.

“into the” and “scatter the,” found in both Weill’s and Vaughan Williams’s settings (which Kowalke claims could not have been familiar to Weill at the time of his composition)<sup>44</sup> seem to be the natural offspring of the words on the page.

Figure 3.1: Weill’s “Beat! Beat! Drums!”



Figure 3.2: Vaughan Williams’s *Dona Nobis Pacem*

The image shows a musical score for Vaughan Williams's "Dona Nobis Pacem". It features five staves. The top four staves are vocal lines with the lyrics "Beat! beat! drums! — blow! bu-gles! blow!" written below them. The bottom staff is a piano accompaniment line. The tempo is marked "ff" (fortissimo).

<sup>44</sup> Kowalke, "I'm an American!", 119.

Figure 3.3: Weill's "Beat! Beat! Drums!"

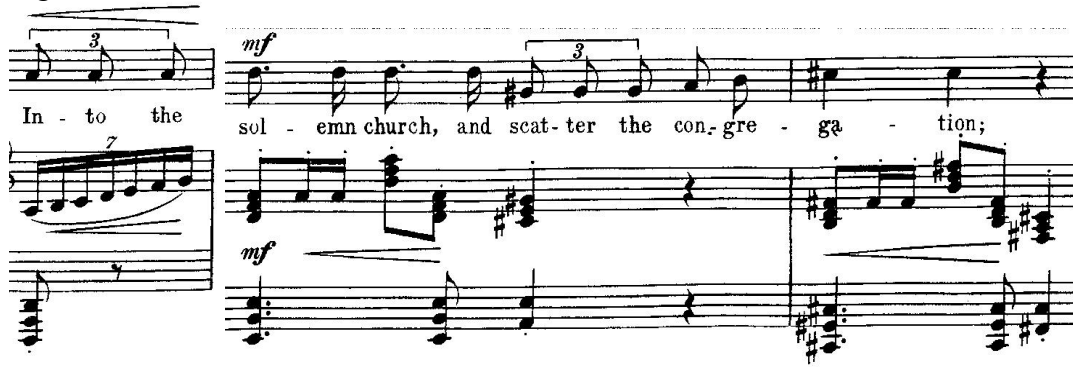


Figure 3.4: Vaughan Williams's *Dona Nobis Pacem*

The image shows a musical score for the song "Dona Nobis Pacem" by Ralph Vaughan Williams. It features a piano accompaniment and a vocal line. The piano part has a prominent bass line with a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure, followed by a series of chords. The vocal line starts with a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure, followed by a series of chords. The lyrics are: "In - to the sol - emn church, and scat - ter the con - gre - ga - tion;". The score is written in 2/4 time and includes dynamic markings such as *p* and *f*.

In Weill's "Beat! Beat! Drums!," the repetitive, formulaic elements of his popular song genres all but disappear. There are many repeating motives, most prominently the bass rhythm and treble movement of the opening piano accompaniment, as well as a return of much of the same melodic material of the first vocal line. But the end of each section in this modified strophic form is not nearly as clear as its beginning; each seems to spin out organically according to the needs of its text. As we will see in some of his American popular songs, Weill uses ascending chromatic lines to approach the ends of phrases; here, however, he uses a much more sophisticated technique of sequencing melodic material (as opposed to circle of fifths harmonies), with slight alterations each

time depending on the text being set. Tunefulness is evidently not a priority in this setting. Although we return to the idea of descending fourths at each reprise of the words “Beat! Beat! Drums!,” text is often highlighted by chanting on monotone or repeating small, contained motives, and there is very little in the way of cadential resolutions of larger phrasing. This piece is not memorable as a piece of music so much as it is as an overall effect.

“Beat! Beat! Drums!” ironically betrays a bit of Weill’s foreign accent in the precision of its text setting. The unaccented beats of text are set with sixteenth notes, eighth note triplets, complex dotted rhythms, and sixteenth-note triplets in a way that indicate Weill took great care to set the sung text exactly as it would be spoken naturally. Unfortunately, as is, it resides in an awkward purgatory between true precision and lyricism. Restricted to the strict four-beat structure of the accompaniment’s drum beats, Weill’s text setting stops short of the realistic settings of Britten, but it goes too far to remain in the realm of suspended disbelief that often accompanies sung text. Furthermore, the quick rhythms of the unaccented syllables, albeit generally accurate for spoken language, are difficult to accomplish with the heightened diction required for classical singing. The result is a bit stilted and uneven. It is interesting to contrast this approach to text setting with that of his German art songs, both before and after working with Busoni. One thing that seemed to remain constant in his shift towards more complex, dissonant art songs in his early twenties was that text setting remained streamlined and fairly lyrical regardless of the poetry. It is only in these much later Whitman settings that Weill seems to have felt the need to prove himself with rhythmic complexity and precision in his relatively new English.

## Dirge for Two Veterans

“Dirge for Two Veterans” is also a bit guilty of awkward, overly specific text setting, and also contains several sections of monotone singing where the focus is on text instead of melody. The final song of the 1942 set also frames the work with similarities to the first song: it starts with soft jazz harmonies and a falling motive in the right hand of the piano that returns later in the piece. It also shares the same drum roll and military imagery of the previous two songs, notably using open harmonies and quick triplet flourishes in the bass to sound like a snare drum just like in “Beat! Beat! Drums.” “Dirge for Two Veterans” takes the military trope the farthest, however. At its climax, we hear the arpeggiated trumpet reveille on “What I have I also give you” – a chilling way to put two soldiers to eternal rest.

“Dirge for Two Veterans” is very loosely in rondo form, with ideas subtly mutating and returning throughout:

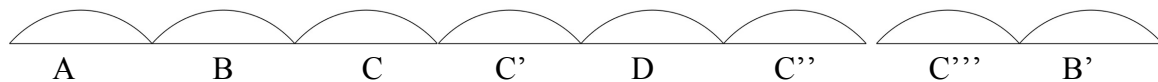


Figure 4: Form of “Dirge for Two Veterans

The increasingly complex C material takes us farther and farther into the realm of classical vocal music and the final moments of the son and father, whereas the B sections remind us of the light, jazzy coolness of the moon that shines over them now. As in “Oh Captain! My Captain!” this juxtaposition between styles serves to bring another tool of contrast to the poetry: the peaceful graveyard versus the bloody battlefield. Weill omits the seventh stanza, bringing together the last line of the sixth “And the strong dead-march

enwraps me” and the beginning of the eighth: “O strong dead-march you please me!” with a climactic crescendo to fortissimo. “By linking the sixth and eighth stanzas into a single musical unit, the climax of both song and cycle, Weill brings into close proximity four recurrent images within the dirge: the moon, bugles, drums, and the dead-march.”<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps the most notable facet of “Dirge for Two Veterans,” however, is its vocal demands. Especially in given the original intended singer, the tessitura and range of this piece is extremely taxing. The preceding songs are certainly not easy for a bass-baritone; “Oh Captain! My Captain!” requires facility over soft, floated high Fs that build to one forte one at the end, and “Beat! Beat! Drums” has quite a few high Es and Fs in which the singer sits up there for several words in a row; it would be tempting to let the larynx creep up in the final page, which consists entirely of forte and fortissimo Ds and Es. But “Dirge for Two Veterans” truly borders on unreasonable for a bass-baritone. Its incessant repeated notes in the passaggio – Ds, Es, and Fs with very few opportunities to recover in between - finds its climax on a fortissimo high G, before falling back to soft, floated high notes at the very end. Tenor William Horne was able to negotiate the requirements of the music (written in the score as being simply for “Piano and Voice” without specifying voice type) by transposing “O Captain! My Captain!” up a minor third and “Dirge for Two Veterans” up a half step.<sup>46</sup> But it is very plausible that bass-baritone Paul Robeson did not record these songs because they just did not suit his voice, apart from all other considerations.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Kowalke, “I’m an American!”, 123.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 115-116.

<sup>47</sup> Weill was in good company. Among the many offers Robeson turned down were also Gershwin’s original Porgy and Mephistopheles in a film of *Faust*.

### **Come up from the Fields, Father**

In his 1947 version of the Whitman Songs, Weill added the song “Come up from the Fields, Father,” but retained “Dirge for Two Veterans” as the final piece and moved “Beat! Beat! Drums!” to the beginning of the set. The reordering helps to build a narrative – the coming bugles of war, a fallen leader, the news of a son’s injury, and the death of father and son – that brings it closer in structure to a classical song cycle. By beginning and ending the set with songs of grief accompanied by military march and jazz idioms, Weill undercut his mission of positive war propaganda in 1942. But in 1947, as the country reflected on the war’s effects, these tropes were more appropriate.

“Come up from the Fields, Father,” tells the story of a family getting a letter of their son’s injury, not realizing that by the time they read it, he is already dead. Musically, Weill subtly refers to the Lilac Scene of his musical *Street Scene* written a year prior, which also uses Whitman’s poetry. The singers of that Whitman setting, Sam and Rose, are children of immigrants who are longing for a piece of the American Dream – a wish Weill could probably relate to well. The music they sing, set to a deceptively hopeful fragment of Whitman’s poetry, symbolizes a temporary relief from sorrow. Likewise, the similar musical material in “Come up from the Fields, Father” represents a family’s naiveté about their son’s injury in a futilely hopeful way.

“Come up from the Fields, Father” is the only one of Weill’s four Whitman settings to contain no diegetic music or references to musical instruments.<sup>48</sup> It is quite long (11 pages), with changes in texture and mood throughout to depict different characters and plot points, almost like a scena. A recent discovery includes some alterations from the extant published score: William Horne’s annotated copy from his

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 120.

recording crosses out the accompaniment after the words “At present low” as the mother reads of her son’s condition – the heightening triplet eighth notes suddenly stop dead in their tracks, only to be revived with the more comforting words that follow: “...but will soon be better.” The song was unpublished until 1984, and the revision was not discovered until a decade later; thus, this revision remains largely unpracticed.<sup>49</sup> Another significant deletion for Weill came in the original manuscript: the elimination of a key verse of Whitman’s text. As he did in the Lilac Scene by eliminating the first strophe of the original poem, Weill subtly changes the context of Whitman’s poetry to suit his own message. The focus on the mother is reduced, and the words “but will soon be better” thus leads seamlessly to “Alas, poor boy, he will never be better.” Kowalke finds parallels to Schubert and Loewe’s “Erlkonig” in the subsequent sparse, drained pronunciation that “the only son is dead.”<sup>50</sup>

Though their present-day reception is often ambivalent, the Whitman settings received good reviews at first publication – not the least of which came from Weill’s wife. Lenya wrote to Weill that the actor Helen Hayes, who would soon record a spoken rendition of “Beat! Beat! Drums!” on a recording of patriotic recitations for RCA Victor with Weill playing his music for the song underneath, “loved the songs (so did I – I think they are the best songs you have ever written. They are the most effortless, at least that’s how they sound). I’ll sing ‘My Captain’ all day, the other ones are too difficult to remember after one hearing.” “It just lifts you right out of your sit,”<sup>51</sup> she exclaimed in her relatively new English.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 115-116.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 115.



Still, Lenya and Weill both were mindful of his intent to write a more serious cycle, and she reassured him that RCA Victor would surely record it with [Lawrence] Tibbett or [John Charles] Thomas,' two leading baritones at the Metropolitan Opera.<sup>52</sup> In May Weill informed Ira Gershwin that indeed "the Whitman songs will be recorded by John Charles Thomas;"<sup>53</sup> unfortunately, the recording apparently never came to fruition. The set's first review in *Musical America*, however, took care to treat the piece as a serious piece of art music:

These are elaborate settings perhaps rather less distinguished melodically, in at least two instances, than in the vividly moodful background created by the accompaniments. The dramatic essence of each poem, however, is keenly sensed in every case and effectively projected, with a climax reached in the 'Dirge for Two Veterans,' in which a poignancy of musical utterance is achieved which parallels that of the texts. The three are large-scale musical delineations of the poems, and they provide rewarding material of potent appeal for the singer with a dramatic voice and a dramatic temperament.<sup>54</sup>

Based on his early Lieder and his nouveau-Lieder of the Whitman Songs, "High Art" to Weill seemed to translate into certain traits: fluidity of form, increasingly longer songs, emphasis on text over melody, subtext built subtly into the accompaniment, complex counterpoint, dissonance, and significant technical demands for both singer and pianist. From a vocal standpoint, these art songs require great range of pitch and dynamics, excellent diction, and an understanding of complex poetry.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Speak Low (When You Speak Love): The Letters of Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya*, ed. Lys Symonette and Kim Kowalke (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 316.

<sup>53</sup> Kowalke, "I'm an American!", 115.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 114-115.

<sup>55</sup> Of course, these throwbacks were not reserved for individual songs. As he was writing *Street Scene*, Weill gave several interviews in which he stressed his intention to write the piece for serious classically trained singers. This is reflected in several ways in the score, including returns to techniques of his earlier "serious" years. In addition to citing several specific quotes from early works, Kowalke points to "characteristically

### PART III: GERMAN LANGUAGE SONGS

#### Weill's "German Style"

The high art song genre is not what propelled Weill to fame in Germany, nor was it his most memorable genre from his American years. The Whitman Settings, Ofrah's Lieder, and the smattering of other art songs Weill worked on before 1925 or after 1935 (there are virtually none in between) are merely a footnote for most of his interpreters or historians. What is given the most attention by far is the style he developed in that 10-year gap. The ways in which he used his German ballad style after his immigration bear fascinating clues as to why Weill wrote the way he wrote: whether his style was primarily motivated by his intended singer, his intended audience, his chosen poet, or something else altogether.

Although much has been made of Kurt Weill's subservience to the masses after his move to the United States, his first and arguably most significant move towards this end came much earlier. Much of his first major transition as a composer might be attributed to the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or "New Objectivity," movement of the 1920s, a reaction against expressionism that called for a return to realism (dictated in an ironically expressionistic and highfalutin manifesto). *Neue Sachlichkeit* aimed to create art for the masses that promoted egalitarianism and enlightenment for their fellow man rooted in the needs of society as a whole.<sup>56</sup> For both practical and aesthetic purposes, the musicians of this movement preferred smaller, more intimate forms – including piano-vocal songs in

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"Weillian" harmonic progressions (cf. the refrain of "Das schöne Kind" [1917] and the climax of Murrant's Aria from *Street Scene* [1947] and "fifth-generated harmonies and pentatonic melodies (cf. Mvt. IV of *Frauentanz* [1923] and "What Good Would the Moon Be?"

<sup>56</sup> Taylor, 40-41.

contrast with the large-scale orchestral songs of Strauss or Mahler.<sup>57</sup> Ernst Bloch's description of *Neue Sachlichkeit* included "light, gaiety, and clarity."<sup>58</sup> words we will find in Weill's own descriptions of his new works from the mid 1920's onwards.

*Neue Sachlichkeit* was closely linked with the ideas of *Americanismus* – German understanding of American values as an alternative to the now unappealing nationalistic ones of WWI's older generation<sup>59</sup> – and *Gebrauchsmusik* – the idea that music should serve a utilitarian function. Musically, *Americanismus* basically translated to jazz: or, more accurately, a distilled, stylized collection of jazz elements that was often used ironically in "serious" composition. In 1926, Weill wrote, "The rhythm of our times is jazz. In it the slow but sure Americanization of all our physical life finds its most notable manifestation."<sup>60</sup> His 1929 *Article on Jazz* describes the genre as "a piece of nature, as the most healthy and powerful expression of an art which, because of its popular origins, has immediately become an international folk music of the broadest possible consequences," and asks, "Why should art-music isolate itself from such an influence?"<sup>61</sup>

*Gebrauchsmusik*, on the other hand, promoted consumer-based compositions that attempted to break down barriers between new music and the masses, as well as broad social educational initiatives;<sup>62</sup> these works were often written to meet a specific need such as radio or film, which were growing at unprecedented rates.<sup>63</sup> New media and

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>58</sup> Stephen Hinton, "Weill: Sachlichkeit, Surrealism, Gebrauchsmusk." In *Essays on A New Orpheus*, edited by Kim Kowalke (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 65.

<sup>59</sup> Brinkmann and Wolff, eds., 264.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 108-9.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>62</sup> Taylor, 60.

<sup>63</sup> Jarman, 34.

popular entertainment industries were beginning to overshadow elitist art forms, and composers were compelled to ride the new wave of mass culture.

Weill met the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement and its offshoots head on, and their tenants guided him for the rest of his life. Historian Douglas Jarman claims that “an awareness of the social obligations of the artist informs all Weill’s music from 1925 onwards.”<sup>64</sup> Virgil Thompson’s observation upon Weill’s death that each of the composer’s works was “a new model, a new shape, a new solution of dramatic problems”<sup>65</sup> applied just as well to his later German repertoire as it did to his American output. With a utilitarian mindset, an emigrating artist “could prevail because he was able to respond to the changing needs of production.”<sup>66</sup> Weill wrote an oft-cited letter to his parents during the winter of 1925-26 that reflects upon his first steps into the populism of his time:

As a composer I am going through the years of sitting on top of a powder-keg. Untapped sources of energy are going to have to explode, and a state of heightened awareness is making me feel perpetually tense...I have got to master a form of expression that is still new to me. And I have discovered to my pleasure what I first found out in *Der neue Orpheus* – that I am gradually working my way toward my “true self” and that my music is becoming much more assured, much freer, much lighter – and simpler.<sup>67</sup>

*Der neue Orpheus*, a cantata for soprano, solo violin, and orchestra, is today considered Weill’s initial foray into surrealism (Adorno refers to it as the first surrealist opera ever<sup>68</sup>) due to its shocking use of realistic elements used in incongruous and parodistic ways. One hears a montage of effects – jazz, dance music, mixed media, cabaret, waltz and

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>65</sup> Brinkmann and Wolff, eds., 269.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>67</sup> Taylor, 81-82.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 81.

march idioms - that seem unsettling in their juxtaposition, creating a surreal soundscape much like a Salvador Dali painting. It is a surprising move from the “serious” composer who just a few years earlier had criticized Hindemith for “dancing rather too far into the land of the foxtrot.”<sup>69</sup>

*Der neue Orpheus* still has the imprint of Busoni in its dissonant, complex polyphonic instrumental style and angular, challenging vocal writing. But a saxophone now appears in the orchestra as well as a prominent role for xylophone, and jazzy syncopation and dance music has started to creep in.<sup>70</sup> It seems that Busoni’s technical teachings were beginning to give way to the words of wisdom Weill would ultimately follow most closely:

My teacher, Busoni, at the end of his life, hammered into me one basic truth which [he] had arrived at after fifty years of pure aestheticism: the fear of triviality is the greatest handicap of the modern artist...Instead of worrying about the material of music, the theory behind it, the opinions of other musicians, my main concern is to find the purest expression in the music for what I want to say, with enough trust in my instinct, my taste and my talent to always write “good” music, regardless of the style I am writing in.<sup>71</sup>

In the coming years, Weill would use the ideas he experimented with in *Der neue Orpheus* to consciously shape himself into a sounding board for the masses: reformulating the structures and labels of his works and priding himself on his accessibility and popularity. On December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1927 he wrote: “In the operatic style I am founding here, music has a much more fundamental role than in the purely action opera, since I am replacing the earlier bravura aria with a new kind of hit song

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>71</sup> John Graziano, “Musical Dialects in Down in the Valley” In *Essays on A New Orpheus*, edited by Kim Kowalke (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 301.

[*Schlager*].”<sup>72</sup> And in the next October, to his publisher Universal Edition: “I am convinced that my gift for writing a completely new kind of popular melody is absolutely unrivaled today. If this matter were organized in a thoroughly large-scale and novel way, there is no doubt that my hit compositions could take the place of the American jazz compositions that are already somewhat passé.”<sup>73</sup> Weill’s own program notes for the first *Mahagonny* opera includes the following: “In his latest works, Weill has been moving in the direction of those who, in all spheres of artistic activity, foresee the liquidation of the arts as social graces... [*Mahagonny*] addresses itself to an audience that unsophisticatedly demands to be entertained in the theater.”<sup>74</sup>

Along with writer Bertolt Brecht, Weill devoted himself to the principle of art as direct and immediate communication – what Weill referred to as “Gestus.”<sup>75</sup> He urged Universal Edition to streamline the accompaniments of his works so that they could be played and listened to by amateurs rather than sophisticated “new music” lovers.<sup>76</sup> Universal was happy to comply, proposing their own changes in “Alabama Song” from *Mahagonny* that toned down some of the edgier harmonies. Weill seemed to easily go along with these suggestions, as he did with many propositions of transpositions or reorchestration.<sup>77</sup> In this way, too, the composer was devoted to the usefulness of his music, the “Gebrauchsmusik” principle in theory and in practice.

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<sup>72</sup> Christopher Hailey, “Creating a Public, Addressing a Market: Kurt Weill and Universal Edition.” In *Essays on A New Orpheus*, edited by Kim Kowalke (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 25.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Taylor, 115.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>76</sup> Hailey, 26.

<sup>77</sup> Taylor, 120.

Perhaps the most significant innovation of Weill and Brecht's collaborations was their reformulation of the song genre. Even the punny label "Mahagonny Songspiel" rather than "Singspiel" in their first hit work together suggests a new outlook. Herbert Fleischer describes the content of these new songs best:

A Weill song is not a common-or-garden hit tune but a ballad. Someone from the lower classes, someone of the streets, sings his or her little bit of life, or little bit of romance, of love, of longing for adventure. The songs are in essence one continuous lamentation, one continuous attack...they are language, philosophy, life in musical sound. Weill found his real self in this song style, the power to let music become language. And his sense of social reality provided the ethos of his work, opened up everything to him.<sup>78</sup>

A major impetus behind this new song style was Weill's new singers – among them, his new bride Lotte Lenya. Lenya is often characterized as a "singing actress" – though she had notable dance and theater experience by the time she married Weill in 1926, she was never a trained singer. Likewise, Weill's first intended Polly in Threepenny Opera was Carola Neher, a former bank teller who was foremost considered an actress. Lenya was to influence Weill's song writing in innumerable ways for the remainder of his life. She created the role of Jenny in the 1928 premiere of *Die Dreigroschenoper*, as well as a role of the same name in the expanded Berlin version of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* in 1931. In the latter work, Weill composed new material specifically for her because she was technically unable to sing the original versions.<sup>79</sup>

These revisions, however, were in keeping with Weill's already-extant attempts to streamline his works. Of *Dreigroschenoper*, Weill stressed the need for a "return to a

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>79</sup> Andreas Hauff, "Recording Review: Kurt Weill - a Musical Portrait," *Kurt Weill Newsletter* 14, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 22.

primitive form of opera” that was “accompanied by radical simplification of the musical language.” Though at first this seemed a limitation to him, in the end it enabled him to put his “gestic music” into practice within a new form of music theater.<sup>80</sup> In an essay called “On the Gestic Character of Music,” Weill explained that he always approached a stage work with a basic question: “What grounds are there for having music on the stage?” This led to a second question: “What is the nature of music for the stage, and are there particular qualities that brand certain music as theater music?”<sup>81</sup>

While Weill worked toward a heightened unity between words and music, Brecht’s contribution to this song style was based on an artificial acting style that leaned toward cabaret. In his “Hints for Actors” that he later appended to the published edition of *Dreigroschenoper*, Brecht delineates three levels of an actor’s speech: plain speech, heightened speech, and singing. These three:

must always remain distinct, and in no case should heightened speech represent an intensification of plain speech, or singing of heightened speech. In no case therefore should singing take place where words are prevented by excess of feeling. The actor must not only sing but show a man singing. His aim is not so much to bring out the emotional content of his song (has one the right to offer others a dish that one has already eaten oneself?) but to show gestures that are so to speak the habits and usage of the body.<sup>82</sup>

Weill’s new song/singing style is a bit of a “chicken and egg” scenario: did Lenya’s strengths and limitations and Brecht’s philosophies shape the way Weill wrote, or would he have inevitably come to his unique aesthetic that Lenya was so aptly able to interpret and Brecht was able to articulate? Would he have included spoken lines in his songs if not for Brecht’s opinions above? Would he have written songs with greater

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<sup>80</sup> Taylor, 136.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>82</sup> Ronald Sanders, *The Days Grow Short: The Life and Music of Kurt Weill* (New York: Hold, Rinehart, and Winston, 1980), 126.



vocal range and more technical demands if Lenya had been a more highly trained singer? Most people opt for the former explanation, but for some, Lenya's style of interpretation is what makes Weill's music meaningful. For composer H.K. Gruber, for instance, song forms Weill was writing in *Mahagonny* required the singer to change their style of singing. "If you hear that sung by a bel canto singer, you cannot understand the words...and you get the wrong impression. When it's sung like that *Mahagonny* becomes a conventional opera...it becomes conventional, unimportant. But if you sing it right – play it straight, in the right style, without romanticism – then you will discover that it is the very first twentieth-century opera."<sup>83</sup>

"Play it straight" is exactly what Lenya did in her interpretation of Weill's songs. In reviews she was praised for her diction and for her "sweet," "light," "cool," and "raw" vocal quality.<sup>84</sup> In recordings, Lenya seems to strip Weill's songs down to their essence, rarely interpolating anything that is not on the page or making any superfluous musical or physical gestures. Her text is always clear throughout her range, with vigorously rolled [r]s. Of her own singing, Lenya says: "Listen to my records carefully, because I really sing. I sing the melody. Sometimes I speak in between, when the emotion needs it, but every note is there, even if I speak."<sup>85</sup> Though she never claimed to be a classically trained singer, according to her close friend and Weill historian Lys Symonette that was the style she and Weill felt most closely akin to:

Knowing Weill's innermost concerns and intents better than anyone else, she realized that deep down he loved the classically trained operatic voice. She was

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<sup>83</sup> H.K. Gruber, "Simplicity Is the Richness: H.K. Gruber Talks About Performing Kurt Weill," *Kurt Weill Newsletter* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 10.

<sup>84</sup> *Kurt Weill Newsletter*, Lenya, Fall 1998, 3, accessed June 13, 2013, <http://kwf.org/images/newsletter/kwn162p1-24.pdf#page=3>.

<sup>85</sup> Gruber, 11.

always disturbed when Weill's songs were referred to as "Cabaret Songs" and often stated that Weill never wrote a single song for the cabaret. She always referred to them as "Art Songs" and felt that in their pure and simple wealth of melody they resembled Schubert songs more than any others.<sup>86</sup>

These "Art Songs," however, were almost nothing like the "Art Songs" explored earlier. Weill's German works established, or were established by, a unique type of song and singer. Compositionally, this translated into a new type of chromaticism with strategically placed "wrong" notes and chords juxtaposed with extremely regular structures and popular rhythms.<sup>87</sup> Weill's harmonies went back to being mainly triadic, with simple (albeit often bizarre) progressions. Among these was what Ian Kemp dubs the "semitonal side-slip,"<sup>88</sup> minor triads with an added sixth, an aversion to dominant chords, and mode mixture that heavily favored the minor mode.

### **Nanna's Lied**

One of the first non-theatrical pieces Weill wrote after immigrating to the United States was "Nannas Lied," a bit of a hidden gem before its publication in Teresa Stratas's 1982 recording and anthology project, *The Unknown Kurt Weill*. Paradoxically, though Lenya never performed it publicly, it was one of her favorite Weill songs. He wrote the piece for her as a Christmas present in 1939, and a private rendition by the couple for its poet Bertolt Brecht in 1940 was proclaimed "absolutely unforgettable." Brecht's poem

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<sup>86</sup>Kurt Weill, *The Unknown Kurt Weill* (Schott: European American Music Corporation, 2005), 1

<sup>87</sup>Taylor, 141.

<sup>88</sup>Ian Kemp, "Harmony in Weill: Some Observations," *Tempo* no. 104 (1973): 12-13.

was previously used by Hanns Eisler in a 1936 allegory based on Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, but Weill did not place it in any theatrical context.<sup>89</sup>

Weill's rendition of "Nannas Lied" is clearly modeled off of the ballads of his Berlin days, most notably "Barbara Song" from *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1928) and "Surabaya Johnny" from *Happy End* (1928). All three pieces are sung by a luckless girl drawn into the gritty underworld, telling the story of how she lost her innocence and is now bitter and disillusioned. The heavily guarded emotions of the singer are juxtaposed with the frank outpouring of what she says: a matter-of-fact but horrible recounting of events. Though this may be rightly attributed to the poet, Bertolt Brecht in all three cases, Weill made this type of dissociation common practice even before he began working with Brecht: for example, in the detached emotionless characters of *Der Zar lasst sich photographieren* (1927).

In "Nanna's Lied," the singer is addressing a group of "Gentlemen" about how she came to land on the "love market." Despite the rueful refrain and initial memory of resentment, any hint of real emotion gets pushed aside with an offhand spoken remark in each strophe: "After all...I am a human being/everything gets used up eventually/you can't stay seventeen forever." The affect of the song can be summed up in one line from the second strophe: "It's amazing how your feelings cool off when you're stingy with them." This is essentially the same character as those in "Barbara Song" and "Surabaya Johnny," the primary difference being that the two earlier characters were beaten down by one man, and Nanna was beaten down by many.

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<sup>89</sup> Carol Kimball, *Song: A Guide to Art Song Style and Literature*, 2nd ed. (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2006), 151-52.

Weill wrote all three of these pieces in the ballad style, with strophic variation form that closely follows the structure of Brecht's poetry. Like the German popular songs of the 1920s, "Nanna's Lied" contains a verse and refrain approximately equal in length and significance, repeated three times each as a single unit. Also typically, the refrain of Nanna's Lied is significantly more lyrical and tender than its verse, and tonicizes the relative major key. While the verse changes text each time and moves the story forward, the refrain remains constant.<sup>90</sup> In "Nanna's Lied," the refrain is actually a quotation of a different poet, Francois Villon, with Brecht's words building context each verse; a change of poets further highlights the contrast between the two sections of music.<sup>91</sup> Weill changes the texture of the final strophe, switching from a fairly lyrical accompanimental figure to martial, dotted pulses with a countermelody that eventually gives way to a return of the original accompaniment in the refrain. The final three bars are unique to this song: rather than doubling the singer for her final line as he had in the previous two refrains, she is accompanied by only two responsorial chords before the piano closes the piece with ostensibly the most "American" sounding two bars of the entire piece.

Most of this perceived shift at the end can be attributed to the harmonies used, cadencing on an Eb Major chord with an added 6<sup>th</sup>. The added 6<sup>th</sup> is prevalent in Weill's work throughout his life (Ian Kemp dubs it Weill's "chord par excellence"<sup>92</sup>), but in his German work it is primarily used in minor settings, creating an unstable and often unsettling half-diminished quality that rarely got resolved in a traditional way. This

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<sup>90</sup> J. Bradford Robinson, "Learning the New Ropes: Kurt Weill and the American Theater Song," *Kurt Weill Newsletter* 15, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 5.

<sup>91</sup> Kimball, 152.

<sup>92</sup> Kemp, 14-15.

chord in Weill's German music controls much of the angst and bitterness mirrored in the text, even in somewhat major modes:

Although Weill's music tends to favor the minor mode (presumably because of its greater versatility and lesser stability) it seems, nevertheless, to be often on the point of slipping into the major; and when it really is in the major, it often has a minor coloring. This is one of his most personal and deeply considered ironies<sup>93</sup>

We see the first inversion half-diminished harmony (a minor triad with an added +6) used throughout the verses of "Nannas Lied:" measure 2 is harmonized with a iiø65 (or iv with an added +6), resolving directly down to a minor tonic with an added +6 instead of the expected dominant. In fact, V chords are elusive throughout the song; with the exception of a few secondary dominants that resolve deceptively in the refrain, they are nowhere to be found. This, too, is emblematic of Weill's German style.

The ambiguity that comes with a lack of standard Tonic-Predominant-Dominant-Tonic progressions is made all the more uncomfortable juxtaposed with an extremely regular phrase structure, pulse, rhythm, and form. The tension here between simplicity and complexity, conformist and nonconformist elements is perhaps the hallmark of all of Weill's German works, and what ultimately makes this piece such a throwback to his earlier style.

Although Lenya never recorded "Nanna's Lied," it is easy to imagine what her rendition might sound like based on her recordings of "Barbara Song" and "Surabaya Johnny," as well as the recorded rendition of her protégée Teresa Stratas. Lenya's and Stratas's understated interpretations are remarkably effective in these songs, particularly in their spoken sections; neither singer does anything to force the drama into her words. They are spoken softly and lowly, almost as a chant, and their meaning rings through on

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 15.

their own. The sung style, as Lys Symonette recalled, was intended to be closest to the classical style. While Lenya mixes her head and chest voice consistently through each of these songs, blending more chest voice in her older recordings, Stratas used full chest voice as an effect in the lower register of “Nannas Lied” as the song progressed and emotions heightened. Like her mentor, the changes in each strophe are subtle but persuasive. Both interpreters used portamenti often, but rarely changed notes or rhythms; Lenya, particularly, was always extremely faithful to the composed rhythms of these ballads. When rhythms were altered slightly in the final strophes, the interpolated rhythms retained the square feeling of the underlying pulse; they are generally double-dotted, for example, instead of inserting a more casual-sounding triplet figure.<sup>94</sup>

### **German-Language Propaganda Songs**

Weill’s two German propaganda songs are the only other settings of German texts he composed while in the United States.<sup>95</sup> Weill had brainstormed for years on ways to use his talents towards the American war effort; these songs were the product. In 1940, he wrote to Erika Mann:

What can we do to help America in her inevitable fight against Nazism?... My idea is to form immediately an organization called something like “Alliance of Loyal Alien Americans” with the purpose of convincing the authorities and the public in this country that we are strongly anti-Nazi, that they can count on us in

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<sup>94</sup> A fascinating contrast can be heard between Lenya’s recording of Surabaya-Johnny and Bette Midler’s 1973 rendition. Whereas Lenya retains her simple, straightforward interpretation, Midler sings this as one may expect an American Broadway or pop singer would – with many rhythmic and textual liberties rife with triplets and “ooh baby”s and a breathy crooning vocal quality. The changes made to the harmonies, textures, and instrumentation of the accompaniment could be a subject of another paper on their own.

<sup>95</sup> Jarman, 140.

every effort to save American democracy, and that they can consider us in every way to be faithful American citizens.<sup>96</sup>

A year later, he wrote to Robert Sherwood:

Like everybody else, I have the ardent desire to serve the country in some capacity. I would take any job. But it seems to me I could really be of some help if I would be allowed to use my connections and reputation among Americans of German descent and refugees from Nazi Germany to organize an effective “cultural attack” on Germany by short-wave radio...In word and music we would tell them the truth about their leaders, the hopelessness of their fight, the power of democracy, and the beauty of life in a free country.<sup>97</sup>

“Und was bekam des Soldaten Weib?,” with text by Bertolt Brecht, was written in March 1942 and offered unsolicited to the War Department unit responsible for the shortwave broadcasts to Germany. The song’s text is in question-answer form, asking “And what did the soldier’s wife receive from Prague?...Shoes. Oslo?...fur. Amsterdam?...a Dutch hat.” Finally, from Russia, she receives the widow’s veil for the funeral. After presenting it to the war department, the song was performed at an anti-Nazi pageant at Hunter College called “We Fight Back.” The next year, the US government helped broadcast the song to Germany.<sup>98</sup>

Setting these German texts for a German audience who were almost certainly not as familiar with his new American aesthetic, Weill again reverted back to his old German cabaret style. “Und was bekam des Soldaten Weib?” contains the same heavy, alternating bitonal piano accompaniment as many of his more famous German songs including “Barbara Song” and “Seeräuberjenny” from *Die Dreigroschenoper*, “Alabama Song” from *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, and “Surabaya Johnny” from *Happy End*.

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<sup>96</sup> Farneth, Juchem, and Stein, 200.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>98</sup> Drew, 323-4.

Ian Kemp describes this technique as “directional ambiguity:” tension created in the new relationships between familiar harmonies.<sup>99</sup>

Figure 5: “Directional ambiguity” in “Und was bekam des Soldaten Weib?”



The “Boom-chuck” texture of octave bass notes alternating with strangely juxtaposed chords in Weill’s German songs were often reminiscent of the fox trot dance style in vogue at the time he was writing. Here, however, it is marked in 4/4 time at Moderato tempo instead of in a faster cut time, and it has a distinctly more funereal, mockingly un-dance-like feel from the very beginning. This initial tone is an interesting choice: the poetry alone insinuates that there is a cheerful reason for the receipt of all of these gifts until the surprising final strophe, but Weill chooses to musically give the ending away before the singing even begins.

Like his Berlin theater songs and “Nanna’s Lied,” “Und was bekam des Soldaten Weib?” is in a modified strophic form. Here, however, Brecht had written seven short strophes with no refrain built into the poetry. Weill thus bent the poetic form into two AAB sections that emulate the character of his German verse-refrain ballads: the two strophes of “verse” each time are minor with a prominent half-diminished seventh chord at each final cadence, and the “refrain” strophes shift to a mostly major, lyrical color.

<sup>99</sup> Jarman, 115.



The final strophe is a coda that suddenly (and ironically) moves entirely to major for a final A section, as the widow receives her veil and it is revealed that this woman is not merely preparing for a party. Again, as in “Nanna’s Lied,” we hear a surprising final twist into Weill’s new “American” compositional style at the final coda; the harmonies shift into a more tonal setting of minor-minor and Major-Major seventh chords, with straightforward, march-like downbeats in the piano and all of the chromaticism gone from the vocal line. The piece concludes with an ascending chromatic flourish into a Major-Major cadence. The last bars are heard almost as a calling card: “This message was brought to you, Germany, by the United States of America.”

Figure 6: Conclusion of “Und was bekam des Soldaten Weib?”

The image shows a musical score for the conclusion of the song "Und was bekam des Soldaten Weib?". It consists of three staves. The top staff is the vocal line, starting with a *rit.* (ritardando) marking. The lyrics "das be - kam sie aus Rus - sen - land." are written below the first few notes. The middle staff is the piano accompaniment, also marked with *rit.* and *p* (piano). It features a series of chords and a triplet of eighth notes. The bottom staff is a lower piano part, showing a chromatic ascent in the final measures. The score concludes with a double bar line.

In this song, writes Morely, “we find traces of an uneasy combination of Lied elements with echoes of Broadway: in particular, the Schumann-esque opening with its reminder of ‘Die beiden Grenadiere’ and the ending with the typical Broadway melodic

unit which can be found in any number of songs from the period.”<sup>100</sup> Though it is true that we find both German and American stylistic traits in this piece, the German far prevail. “American Weill” peeks out only at the very end, giving that “calling card” extra significance. Weill thus inserts a surprise ending all his own, completely apart from Brecht’s poetic twist.

“Wie lange noch?,” with text by Walter Mehring, was written in the spring of 1944 specifically upon request for the Office of War Information in Washington. It was also performed for the “We Fight Back” radio series and for the Hunter College review. Its music is derived from Weill’s 1934 chanson “Je ne t’aime pas.” David Drew speculates that “almost certainly, Weill was asked to supply, at very short notice, another anti-Nazi song to be recorded at the same time as the ‘Soldatenweib’ ballad... The reason for the urgency and for the secrecy was that the Allied invasion of Normandy was imminent. After 6 June 1944 the question ‘Wie lange noch?’ would have additional force.”<sup>101</sup> W.C. Marck of the Office of War Information wrote the following to Weill on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1944:

This organization wishes to express its deep appreciation and to thank you and Mrs. Weill for your very fine work on the song, “Wie lange noch.” These recordings, which have a very definite place in the prosecution of the war, have been received, reshipped, and by the time this note reaches you, they will have reached their ultimate destination. At some time in the future, we hope that it will be possible for us to show you more definitely how your song assisted in the total war effort. Until such time, however, we would appreciate your treating the song in a most confidential manner.<sup>102</sup>

Mehring’s text speaks to a person who was once beloved, gave promises of blue skies, but then tormented the singer. Out of context, it could be the story of another of

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<sup>100</sup> Kim H. Kowalke, ed., *The New Orpheus: Essays On Kurt Weill* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 197-8.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 341.

<sup>102</sup> Farneth, Juchem, and Stein, 230.

Weill's despairing, disillusioned Berlin heroines. The former love is spoken to directly "Look at me, will you!...I believed you." and told emphatically that "it's over." The final refrain cries out, "How much longer? How long?" In the context the War Department intended, this former love can be taken as Hitler – a brilliant approach by Mehring and Weill because it does not place the blame on the German people they wish to persuade. Rather, they were just like the women in Weill and Brecht's popular operas – naively tricked by a smooth but ultimately unsavory man. Now that his true character had been revealed, it was now up to them to "break up" with him.

Because the music of "Wie lange noch?" was actually intended as a French chanson, its style is set apart from that of "Und was bekam des Soldatenweib" or "Nanna's Lied." One hears a softer-edged, romantic lyricism, even in sections with the same harmonic palette as some of the earlier German songs. For example, the song begins with the same unconventionally used two chords as "Und was bekam des Soldatenweib:" a minor tonic alternating with a Ger+6 chord. However, whereas the quarter note pulses in the Soldatenweib ballad were highlighted with march-like dotted rhythms, they are softened here by syncopation in the melody and eventually resolve indirectly in a standard way.

Mehring's text to "Wie lange noch" is structured the same way as Weill's music to the first German propaganda song: AAB, AAB. However, in order to fit the text into his preexisting music, Weill arranges this text into four short sections for each of the two strophes. The first is in f minor; the second changes keys to the parallel F Major and shifts to the lyricism that is usually reserved for the refrain. The third and fourth sections

are the true refrain in the new relative d minor, climaxing in the first part and dying away in the last.

Virtually all of the music of “Je ne t’aime pas” was retained in “Wie lange noch,” including the harmonies and key. There were, however, a few subtle changes. Weill significantly thins out the texture of the verses in the German version, and adds imitation in the piano part of the second section. The B section goes from heavy pulsing chords in the French version to rocking single notes. He also adds more opportunities for the bottom to drop out of the accompaniment, notably in the first and last bars of the refrain, giving the title words more impact. A short piano interlude in m. 33 turns from a few eighth notes in the bass to a more prominent treble voice with dotted rhythms. And, perhaps most significantly, where the final section was directed to be spoken in the French chanson, the German is now notated with pitches. As a result, the piano part is less bound to the melody. The transition from d minor to f minor at the repeat is also sparser. The final coda is far more dramatic in Weill’s revisions, with a call and response of the refrain motive between the singer and pianist as the singer cries “Wie lange noch?” one final time an octave up and the accompanist bangs out 7-voice accented chords.

These changes could be possibly attributed to Weill’s compositional maturity in the ten years that had passed since the first rendition. Or, perhaps they are due to the change in audience (French vs. German) or singer (Lys Gauty vs. Lenya). Or, the more desperate purpose of this new song, with more desperate text, could have provoked alterations. Another possible influence could have been the medium by which the German propaganda songs would be distributed: radio. In 1929 as he was preparing his *Berlin Requiem*, Weill delineated what he felt were priorities for that medium:

The basis of a radio art are [*sic*]: a strong musical structuring which suits the spiritual content of the work and which has the potential for a scenic production, but is compelling enough musically to enable the listener, without the help of the stage, to see in his mind a picture of the people who speak to him... it is the clarity and the transparency, rather than the refinement of the instrumental sound that is important. The contents and the form of these radio compositions must...capture the interest of a large number of people of all sorts while the means of musical expression must present no difficulties to the inexperienced listener.<sup>103</sup>

These ideas, especially given the context for which Weill was composing the two German propaganda songs, may help elucidate their repetitive nature and the straightforwardness of their rhythmic setting. It could also help to explain the pruning Weill did to the accompaniment of “Wie lange noch;” the pared-down piano part indeed lends itself to more clarity and transparency.

It is tempting to listen to “Nanna’s Lied,” “Und was bekam des Soldatenweib,” and “Wie lange noch?” and try to draw cause-effect relationships between Weill’s circumstances and his writing style - particularly through the lens of his “Gebrauchsmusik” background. For example, one may claim that writing for Lotte Lenya, setting the poetry of Bertolt Brecht, or composing for a German audience signaled to Weill certain structures, harmonies, and melodic characteristics. Because Lenya was so effective at dark, understated storytelling, Weill could write her dark, understated music. Because Brecht wrote strophic ballads about edgy, unstable characters, Weill could write strophic songs with edgy, unstable harmonies. Because the German people expected a certain style from Weill based on the angst his stage works reflected during the Weimar Republic, Weill was compelled to continue in that style for that audience.

What happened, however, when one or two of those elements were isolated? Could certain external factors truly translate into musical elements – Brecht’s poetry

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<sup>103</sup> Jarman, 110-111.

equating into half-diminished seventh chords, or Lenya's melodies getting square dotted rhythms, or that German audiences getting the fox-trot idiom? An interesting response can be found in a scena Weill wrote in his first year in the United States. "The Fraulein and the Little Son of the Rich" was written in 1936 in New York specifically for Lotte Lenya. The 15 minute "song drama" is set to texts by Robert Graham, an obscure poet about which very little is known. The text, a soliloquy by a European governess to a privileged American baby, is a logical attraction to a new immigrant immersing himself in American musical culture for the first time.

Musically, however, "The Fraulein and the Little Son of the Rich" could not be more different from the other private work Weill wrote for Lenya in America, "Nanna's Lied." It is in C Major, and almost entirely diatonic throughout. The opening melody is reminiscent of the children's folk song "Lightly Row;" it does not stretch far beyond arpeggiations of underlying triads or stepwise motion as the piece progresses. Although there are some of Weill's characteristic +6s, they are added to major harmonies with lots of open, jazzy mm7 chords. Standard Tonic-Predominant-Dominant-Tonic relationships exist throughout the piece with only a few passing harmonies. There is no dissonance between the voice and piano. It is quite possibly the most banal thing Weill ever wrote. This piece is truly an anomaly among Weill's works, and was never performed.

"The Fraulein and the Little Son of the Rich" may be considered a growing pain in Weill's self-conscious quest to fit his compositional identity to his new circumstances. Though Lenya-as-muse was a constant in this transition, it would be several years before Weill was comfortable exploiting the part of his compositional past that she so successfully inhabited. In 1936, it was more important to Weill to explore the uncharted

territory of “American” vernacular music, beginning with the most basic and banal. One year later, Weill reflected on his own balance between utility and artistry in an unpublished article:

What one calls artistic freedom is a strange thing. Creative artists look for independence, for the freedom to engender their works without external constraints. On the other hand they need restraints to prevent them from going astray and getting into areas of abstraction. They have to know for whose benefit they are working, because it is only by bearing in mind the target at which their works are directed that they can discover the spiritual foundation without which any art is merely an empty play with forms. Only in this way can we understand why the majority of the world’s great works of art are the result of commissions, i.e. were intended for a specific purpose and for a specific circle of people, works created in the area of friction where external pressure interacts with inner freedom, compulsion with desire.<sup>104</sup>

Clearly, Weill was considering who he was writing for even in the rare independent private works he composed: “The Fraulein and the Little Son of the Rich” and “Nanna’s Lied” were two of the only private songs he wrote after his move, or even after his first Berlin theater successes. Without external pressures, however, it took him some trial and error to determine what style of music worked for which contexts.

### **Transitions**

On March 21<sup>st</sup>, 1933 Weill fled Berlin by car, arriving in Paris two days later. The next two years were spent in a sort of limbo, straddling projects based in Germany, France, London, and the United States. Weill’s purgatory extended to his muse as well: his and Lenya’s divorce was finalized in September 1933 (they remarried in 1937), and during his Paris years his new compositions were primarily sung by Lys Gauty: a highly trained singer with a warm, expressive instrument very different from Lenya’s cool, bright, removed interpretations. Among his French works were “Complainte de la

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<sup>104</sup> Taylor, 252.

Seine,” “Je ne t’aime pas” (which was later turned into “Wie lange noch?”), and “J’attends un navire”. French cabaret style was possibly the perfect transition between the edgy Berlin theater style in which Weill had been writing and the smooth, polished Broadway style he would soon inhabit. These pieces have some of the same “directional ambiguity” in their harmonies as their German brethren, but with significantly more standardized chords. Paired with more fluid textures and syncopation, the shock of their juxtaposition is markedly softened. The sung style is also a fitting hybrid between the square, understated, text-centered interpretation of the German theater singers and the crooning lyricism of Broadway ballads.

By the time Weill arrived in America, his style was already somewhat tempered. From the foundation set in Paris, he would build a vastly different aesthetic in the last fifteen years of his life. Elliott Carter perhaps articulates this change best in his review of Weill’s *One Touch of Venus*:

Where in pre-Hitler days his music underlined the bold and disillusioned bitterness of economic injustice, now, reflecting his new environment and the New York audiences to which he appeals, his social scene has shrunk to the bedroom and he has become the composer of “sophisticated” scores...In the atmosphere of Broadway, where so much music is unconvincing and dead, Weill’s workmanlike care and his refined sense of style make up for whatever spontaneity and freshness his music lacks.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 282.



## PART IV: ENGLISH-LANGUAGE POPULAR SONGS

### **Weill the American**

Although Weill's move towards a more Americanized style was noticeable to all, few were aware of what a conscious process that transformation was. After immigrating, Weill wrote "theme exercises" for himself in which he tried different accompaniments of melodies to bring them closer to the style of Tin Pan Alley. According to J. Bradford Robinson, his focus lay in three areas: harmony, chromaticism, and piano texture.<sup>106</sup> In the "theme" exercises that have been recovered, Weill experiments with secondary dominant chords and brings new motion to the inner voices of his accompaniments. Robinson points out, however, that Weill has not completely assimilated yet at the time of these exercises (between 1936 and 1938) - instead of using the more common 9th chords of American jazz, Weill uses MM7 chords.<sup>107</sup> He also has not fully embraced the fifth-related chord progressions favored by his new peers.<sup>108</sup> But these elements too were quickly adjusted, as seen in his hit tunes beginning around 1941 - including "My Ship" (1941) and "Speak Low" (1943). The propaganda songs discussed here, all written in 1942, demonstrate a developed sense of American idioms that include plentiful dominant ninths and circle of fifth patterns, as well as a tendency to write fairly diatonic melodies with chromaticism reserved for the accompaniment.<sup>109</sup> The songs, however, still retain Weill's characteristic added sixth chords, oscillations between major and minor, and parsing together of different high and low genres.

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<sup>106</sup> Robinson, 3-4.

<sup>107</sup> For specific examples, please refer to Robinson's article found here <http://kwf.org/images/newsletter/kwn152p1-24.pdf>

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

Formally, too, Weill deliberately shifted from the German strophic verse-refrain discussed previously to the standard American popular bar form:

- The verse, if not omitted entirely, was usually reduced to a parlendo introduction (“setup”) to the refrain (“chorus”) and was generally excluded from repeats;
- A new element of contrast emerged in the so-called “channel,” “bridge,” or “release” (as the B section of the 32-bar AABA chorus form is variously known) to replace the former contrast between verse and refrain;
- Sometimes the text of the chorus was altered at each repetition, thereby shifting the narrative function from the new atrophied verse to the chorus itself.<sup>110</sup>

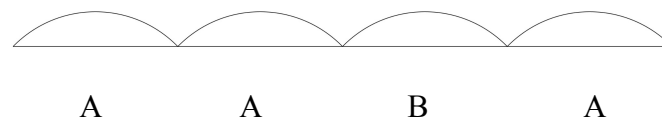


Figure 7: 32-bar AABA form, often used in 20<sup>th</sup> century American popular music

Formal adjustment was arguably easier for Weill, since his structures were at least partly dictated by his poetry - generally written in the forms most closely aligned to his poet's nationality. For example, Brecht's poems worked well in strophic forms, and Ira Gershwin's worked well in the bar form outlined above.

Of course, Weill described his work in less technical terms when discussing his new American output with the public. In numerous interviews, he is charming and enthusiastic about the new terrain he is exploring. He cites George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* and early jazz as major influences<sup>111</sup> and explains that it takes time for a composer to develop a style - he is no exception. His own style, he says, "is melodious. People say they can recognize my music when they hear only three measures of it. I believe in the simplification of music. If someone has something to say, it is not important what means

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>111</sup> R.C.B., "Kurt Weill Has Secured Niche of His Own at 35," *New York World Telegram*, December 21, 1935.

he uses so long as he knows how to use them."<sup>112</sup> This simplification bears the stamp of "jazz of the time of the 'St. Louis Blues,' unadulterated by the complexities of Debussy or Rimsky-Korsakoff. I wish to make it clear that modern composers did not go to jazz to borrow its idiom. It was not the actual taking of material. It was an influence you did not feel. Freedom, directness, simplicity, that's what jazz had."<sup>113</sup> Weill's library at the time of his death reflects his appreciation of streamlined music: Songs and Airs by Caccini, Mozart, Milhaud, and Copland are all represented, and not much in the way of complex Lieder or symphonic works - certainly no traces of some of his more highbrow contemporaries from the Fatherland. In a 1940 New York Sun article, Weill openly rejected the philosophies of some of his émigré peers:

I'm convinced that many modern composers have a feeling of superiority towards their audiences. Schoenberg, for example, has said that he is writing for a time fifty years after his death. But the great "classic" composers wrote for their contemporary audiences. They wanted those who heard their music to understand it, and they did. As for myself, I write for today. I don't give a damn about posterity...I wrote ten operas in Germany. Several of them were very popular. But I got tired of composing for so limited an audience, limited not only numerically but emotionally and intellectually. I wanted to reach the real people, a more representative public than any opera house attracts...I have never acknowledged the difference between 'serious' music and 'light' music. There is only good music and bad music.<sup>114</sup>

Through this and several other interviews, Weill orchestrated a clear message for the media, his new audiences, and his detractors: Yes, his style had changed. But its underlying essence still lay in the desire to reach the general public in whatever means necessary. Though this could not be said for his earliest works under Busoni, populism certainly played a role in his output from the mid 1920s onwards. "Music is seeking to

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Farneth, 162.

<sup>114</sup> William G. King, "Composer for the Theater: Kurt Weill Talks About 'Practical Music,'" *New York Sun*, February 3, 1940

enter the consciousness of wider audiences,” he had written in an essay in 1927, “for only in that way can it maintain its viability.”<sup>115</sup>

### **The Weill Singer**

The production of these new songs was matched by their performance: though the techniques shifted a bit, Weill intended for the basic motivation of the singer to remain the same. Soon after his immigration, Weill began working with the singers of his new show, *Johnny Johnson* at the Group Theater. These performers were primarily actors, and Weill soon felt compelled to give them a prepared lecture on singing and musical theater in general. His notes for this speech are a fascinating look into the relationship between Weill's songs and the human voice.

In his speech, Weill describes his transition from more classically based musical theater as a kind of conversion: "...I saw that [opera] is not the way for a new musical theatre. I had to leave the opera house. I had to go to the theatre. So I wrote the first opera for actors. Dreigroschenoper." He expresses derision not only for the current operatic institutions such as the Metropolitan Opera (which he refers to as a "museum") but also for operatic vocal production:

How shall the actor sing? – Opera-Singers, pure voice-acrobates [sic] without expression. Sexual effect of a beautiful voice. Music as Opeate [sic]. Wagner. All singer voices are alike. No personality. The actor uses his voice in a natural way, without forcing it, must as he sings in life. He carries the word through the melody of his song. Unity of word and music. Every word must be understood.<sup>116</sup>

Prioritizing words and natural production versus acrobatics - or even, one may infer, conventional beauty - clearly coincides with the abilities of his wife, the often selfish

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<sup>115</sup> Taylor, 251-254.

<sup>116</sup> Farneth, 165.

agendas of Brecht, and the general ideals of populism on both sides of the Atlantic. But it is surprising to see how vehemently Weill rejects operatically trained singing at this time - particularly looking ahead to the vocal demands of his later works such as *Street Scene* and the *Whitman Songs*. Perhaps Weill was attempting to break down the barriers of operatic singing only to bring it into the fold of a middle ground. By the end of his speech, he comes close to saying so: "Situation of musical theatre in this country: Metropolitan, worst example of old fashioned opera (museum) on the one side, musical comedy, which tried to be sophisticated and low brow at the same time, on the other side. Nothing between. Enormous field for a musical theater."<sup>117</sup>

One may argue that musical comedy trying to be "sophisticated and low brow at the same time" is precisely the "between" Weill is looking for. But from a marketing standpoint, it was perhaps easiest (especially in the final years of the Great Depression) to cater to the lowest common denominator: biographer Ronald Taylor claims that "businessmen were looking longer and harder at whether it made sense to invest in theatre and the arts, especially if there were a dubious scent of something high-brow, or even middle-brow."<sup>118</sup> For Weill, sophistication did not have to coincide with elitism. Rather, it had to do with thoughtful ideas for all to contemplate, and for those ideas to be conveyed, a singer simply had to enunciate.

Weill continued his speech by giving examples of how a singer should accent syllables, sing "Non legato" and pass seamlessly from speaking into singing, aware of the subtle nuances between "pure speaking to half speaking, recitativo, half singing, and pure singing." The singer is not to impose "stylisation" but respond to the natural gestures of

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Taylor, 216.

the music. The examples he gives include Schubert and his past German works. Given that this speech was given very soon after Weill's immigration, and that the work these actors were to perform was still a fairly transitional work, it is difficult to assess whether this advice applies more to the works Weill had written in the past or the works he would soon write - or, to both. Based on recordings of the time, it may be that the directions of "non legato" and accented singing were remnants of the older Weill style. And using degrees of speech and singing, as well as stripping a performance of excess stylization, were certainly traits of his German works, as we have seen. But doubtless some of this carried through into the crooning style of 1930's Broadway, and the elegant simplicity of many of its performers.<sup>119</sup>

As Weill settled into his new country, he further developed his ideas of natural singing. In a 1937 article, he directs singers to "sing with the voice he would use to give speech its highest intensity."<sup>120</sup> The reporter, interestingly, attributes this to his "Zeitkunst conception of music in the theatre" - inferring that this is not an inherently American value. In another article of the same year, Weill declares that "Vocal expression need not be musical [sic] complex" and extols the good actors or actresses who are able to sing naturally.<sup>121</sup> A decade later, Weill has retained his ambivalence for traditional operatic writing - "Starting out as a composer of grand opera at the age of twenty-five, I soon discovered the limitations of a form of entertainment in which almost all of the other demands of the theatre had to be sacrificed to the music, or, more often, to

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<sup>119</sup> Farneth, 165.

<sup>120</sup> David Ewen, "Musical Modernist," *Cue*, January 23, 1937, 6-7, 44-45

<sup>121</sup> *Pacific Coast Musician*, National Music, Opera, and the Movies, July 3, 1937, 12-13.

the delicate condition of the vocal chords [sic] of the prima-donna.”<sup>122</sup> But as Weill had prided himself earlier on writing the first opera for actors, now he was excitedly preparing to cast a musical entirely with singers: "Opera was now popular entertainment; the public had become interested in singing."<sup>123</sup> We see this reflected in the increased vocal demands of his songs both on and off stage.

Today, interpreters of Weill's songs tend to use necessary distinctions even when musicologists work to eradicate the image of "Two Weills." Andreas Hauff, in a review of a concert by soprano Stefanie Wust, wrote:

There are two lines of tradition among Weill interpreters. One, as shaped by Lotte Lenya and Gisela May, originated in the legitimate theater and in the cabarets; the second one, which in the last few years has moved more and more into the foreground, has its roots in the classical tradition of opera and Lied. Neither side may claim exclusivity; Weill's musical theater moves back and forth between frontiers.<sup>124</sup>

For performers, there is still a "Two Weill's" element to their interpretations. But it involves a nuanced series of artistic decisions that are not solely based on any one factor. The key difference between musicologists and singers in this area may be that the "Two Weills" camp of musicologists has typically drawn its lines on geographical and chronological boundaries. For singers, the Whitman Songs of 1947 are likely to be sung with a similar vocal technique as the 1916 O'Farrell's Lieders; the 1942 "Und was bekam des Soldatenweib" will be sung in a similar head-chest voice mix and occasional *sprechtstimme* style as the 1928 "Barbara Song." And, as we shall see, the 1942 Propaganda songs present some of the most interesting artistic decisions for their singers.

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<sup>122</sup> Kurt Weill, "'Street Scene' Becomes a 'Dramatic Musical,'" *New York Times*, January 5, 1947.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Andreas Hauff, "Recording Review: Kurt Weill - a Musical Portrait," *Kurt Weill Newsletter* 14, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 22.

## American Propaganda Songs

Weill's very first experiences writing propaganda war songs were during WWI for the German cause.<sup>125</sup> The "Fun to be Free" pageant introduced Weill's activist side to the United States for the first time at Madison Square Garden on Oct. 5<sup>th</sup>, 1941. The pageant put Weill in touch with the Committee to Defend America and the Fight for Freedom Committee, whose purpose was to increase support for the entry of the United States into World War II.<sup>126</sup> After the United States did join the war two months later, Weill directed his talents more purposefully towards this cause. From February through April of 1942, Weill set out to compose specifically for the American war effort, producing several pieces now labeled his "propaganda songs," with texts by various librettists:

Song of the Free (Archibald MacLeish)  
Schickelgruber (Howard Dietz)  
One Morning in Spring (St. Clair McKelway) - missing  
The Good Earth (Oscar Hammerstein II)  
Buddy on the Nightshift (Oscar Hammerstein II)  
Song of the Inventory (Lewis Allan)  
We don't feel like surrendering today (Maxwell Anderson)  
Oh Uncle Samuel! (Maxwell Anderson)  
- arrangement of a song by Henry C. Work  
Toughen up, Buckle down, Carry on (Dorothy Fields)<sup>127</sup>

These pieces were primarily written for performance in the "Lunchtime Follies" or "Lunch Hour Follies," variety shows organized by Weill, Moss Hart, Harold Rome, and Kermit Bloomgarten. The shows consisted of songs, dances, and sketches used as

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<sup>125</sup> Lys Symonette and Kim H. Kowalke, eds., *Speak Low (When You Speak Love): The Letters of Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya*, 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 25.

<sup>126</sup> Farneth, Juchem, and Stein, 208.

<sup>127</sup> David Drew, *Kurt Weill: A Handbook* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 322.



entertainment for factory workers on their lunch break, and were produced on a small platform with a piano and microphones across the East coast.<sup>128</sup> Weill, who was in a lull at the time writing theatrical works, found this type of sustained commitment very rewarding. In an essay called “A Coke, A Sandwich and Us!” Weill described his first experience with the “Lunchtime Follies”:

We arrived at the shipyard with a group of about ten performers. The workers had built a little outdoor stage in a square overlooking the sound, against the background of a victory ship which was just ready to be launched. It was one of the most exciting moments of my theatrical life when at noon, with the sound of the lunch whistle, some 1,400 men rushed into the square and watched the show while they were eating lunch. The show consisted of some singing and dancing, with the Kaufman and Hart sketch “The Man Who Came to Russia” as the center piece. We felt immediately that the idea was what Broadway would call “a natural”. It had the informality, the genuine popularity, the immediate contact between audience and performers which you find when a wandering circus comes into a small town. Strangely enough, ever since, whenever I went out with our shows, I experienced the same excitement at the sound of the whistle, the same feeling that this was theatre in the oldest and best sense, comparable to the Greek theatre, the Chinese theatre or the miracle plays of the Middle Ages.”<sup>129</sup>

Some of the propaganda songs were also used for a large-scale pageant entitled *We Will Never Die* in March of 1943, described in the New York Sun as “a spectacular memorial to the 2,000,000 Jews killed in Europe,”<sup>130</sup> and for the “This is War” government-sponsored radio series.<sup>131</sup>

The songs in these musical reviews were purely American in every way: purpose, style, and presentation. Not only was Weill composing for a relatively new American audience, but he was attempting to connect with a blue collar workforce with which he had little experience in the most direct way possible. PM magazine’s article on the

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<sup>128</sup> Jarman, 77.

<sup>129</sup> Taylor, 275.

<sup>130</sup> Farneth, Juchem, and Stein, 221.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 210.

“Lunch Hour Follies” on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1942 reflects the tone of these shows in stark contrast to Weill’s previous theater endeavors: “Four thousand Todd [Shipyards] employees cut short their lunch hour to lampoon Hitler in pungent Brooklynese and whistle at Sunny O’Dea’s flashy legs.”<sup>132</sup> After the performance, Weill wrote to Archibald MacLeish, “We all felt that here is the most natural field of activity for all those writers, musicians, and artists who are desperately looking for their place in the nation’s war effort. But beyond that, we felt that this might become the birthplace of a real people’s theater.”<sup>133</sup>

Just as Weill’s written letters to Bertolt Brecht were very different from his letters to Ira Gershwin in terms of tone and language, so too are his settings of their words. The American propaganda songs are immediately accessible to a wide range of listeners, with simple, tonal accompaniments and straightforward melodies. By now, Weill was able to comfortably incorporate archetypal American song forms familiar to his new “masses”. “We Don’t Feel like Surrendering Today” contains large stretches of circle-of-fifths progressions and mm7 or Mm7 chords, along with Weill’s now-typical Major triad with an added 6th. “Toughen Up, Buckle Down” does much of the same, and includes smooth chromatic descents in the bassline and predictable diatonic melody save the occasional lower chromatic neighbor. Both songs are unsparing in their military tropes: dotted rhythms, triplets, and arpeggiated bugle calls reign throughout. Unlike “Beat! Beat! Drums!,” these tropes are heard here in the context of regular antecedent-consequent phrasing, ABA forms, and extremely obvious tonality.

The propaganda songs were just that – propaganda, written for all levels of the American public. Some dismiss them because of that as “the work of an intellectual

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 215.

writing down to his assumed public, which is a recipe for embarrassment.”<sup>134</sup> But even within the framework of populist evangelism, Weill was able to infuse American musical standards with his extant sense of artistry and edginess.

### **Walked Through the Country**

Perhaps the best example of this juxtaposition between the light and the macabre is the unpublished song “Walked Through the Country” (also known as “One Morning in Spring”), with texts by St. Clair McKelway. McKelway was a writer for the *New Yorker* magazine and held army relations posts in the Air Force during World War II. His poem begins jauntily:

Walked through the country morning in spring  
Saw the flowers blooming, heard the birds sing  
Looked in a meadow, saw a man mowing...

The narrator asks the man what he is doing, and the man replies:

“Doing” says he what you can’t do too often [*sic*]  
I’m driving long nails in Schickelgruber’s coffin  
In Hirohito’s coffin  
In Mussolini’s coffin

The poem ends with a call to “swing that sythe.” There is a sharp contrast between blooming flowers and singing birds and the demise of the axis leaders (“Schickelgruber” is a derogatory reference to Hitler’s scandalous lineage, which we shall encounter again shortly) – similar to the contrast between the worldly gifts the woman receives in Brecht’s “Und was bekam des Soldatenweib” and their ultimate purpose at her loved one’s funeral. For Brecht’s setting, Weill had darkened the tone of his music from the very beginning. Here, he does the opposite. There is absolutely no shift in musical tone

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<sup>134</sup> Taylor, 273-275.

when the tone of the poetry darkens; it remains satirically light and commonplace. This is probably at least partially because here, these deaths are not actually bad news to the intended audience; everyone Weill is writing for wants Hitler, Hirohito, and Mussolini dead.

In the first part of the song, the only hint of lurid foreshadowing is in the Db blue note that upsets the circle of fifths bassline in measure 3 – easily offset by the cheerful scalar grace note pattern that begins each phrase. The “punchline” of “driving long nails in Schickelgruber’s coffin” is the extremely regular consequent of an antecedent-consequent phrase – directly beforehand, we hear a cliché lower neighbor in thirds between the treble and bass reminiscent of a barbershop quartet. The final Allegro phrase is a syncopated, sing-songy “swing it, swing it, swing that sythe” offset by punchy chords in the piano – it sounds exactly like any other calls to “swing it” in this period of music. The song repeats with the same text and variations in the melody – which, as in the first verse, is doubled by the right hand of the piano. This second melody is higher and showier for the singer, with the only remaining original material sung just before the “punchline.” The concluding “Swing it, swing it” goes from the original descending thirds to a more sardonic tritone. These intervals stand in stark contrast to the open, jazzy harmonies that accompany them – the last of which is a major tonic chord with an added +6, Weill’s Americanized version of his characteristic harmony.

### **Buddy on the Nightshift**

“Buddy on the Nightshift” is sung by one factory worker to his replacement at the end of the day. Its form is a variation on bar form repeated twice, with a modulation

between the two halves. The piece begins with accented quarter notes in the upper part of the piano reminiscent of factory whistles, and doubles the vocal line throughout. Weill's setting of the text uses dotted eighth-sixteenth rhythms and a repeating rhythmic motive to mark stressed and unstressed syllables in a distinctly casual, unstilted way – much in the way two factory workers may in fact talk to one another.

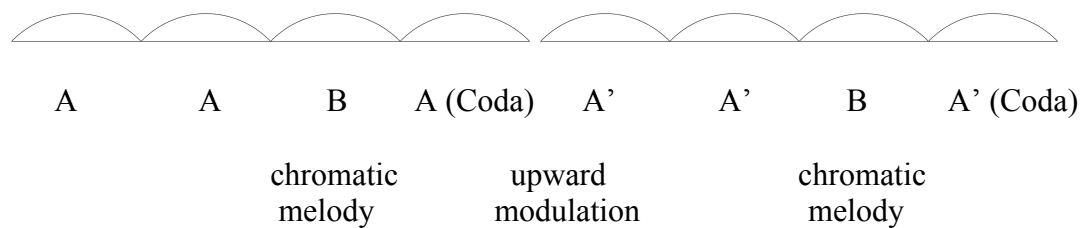
Figure 8: repeating rhythmic motive in “Buddy on the Nightshift”



The intelligibility of text is clearly a priority in this setting, with the range entirely in the middle voice and simple end rhymes elongated at the ends of each phrase. The harmonies of the A section consist of mm7 and MM7 chords often seen in jazz music, with chromatic neighbor tones in the same dotted eighth-sixteenth rhythm seen in the melody; the melody outlines these chords as well. The melody of the B section consists almost exclusively of an ascending chromatic scale seen in any number of popular tunes of the era, including the A section of Billy Strayhorn's "Take the A Train," (1939) Glenn Miller's "Moonlight Serenade" (1939) and Cole Porter's "It's De-Lovely" (1936). It is essentially a circle of fifths pattern of secondary dominants in first inversion, and provides a smooth, regular progression that still allows for some non-diatonic (but non-controversial) colors. After the modulation, the text is identical to the first verse and the rhythmic setting is almost identical as well; however, the melody of the A sections and the texture of the piano accompaniment are altered. The overall effect of "Buddy on the

Nightshift” is a light, airy tune that would work perfectly with big-band accompaniment, completely consonant throughout in both text and music.

Figure 9: Form of “Buddy on the Nightshift”

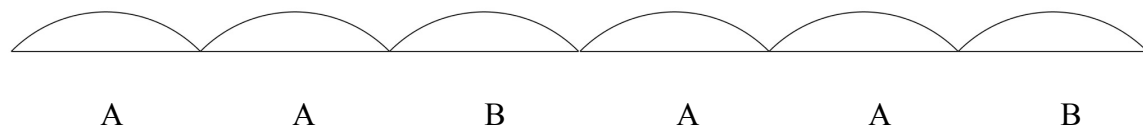


### Shickelgruber

Perhaps the most derisive of the American propaganda songs - and thus closest to the affect of Weill’s earlier German works - is “Schickelgruber.” “You were born a child of shame,” reads the text, “You have always been a bastard, Even though you changed your name!” The second verse gives a recount of the friends Hitler betrayed: “Is he good or evil fairy? All his pals have now grown wary, That is, those of them who didn’t rate the purge. And the scent will ever linger, how he gave his friends the finger just to gratify and culminate an urge.” It then concludes with unwavering certainty of his eventual demise: “When the judgment day is due, Repercussions from the Russians, Schickelgruber, say you’re through. Ev’ry village that you pillage in revenge will turn on you!” Weill’s setting of Howard Dietz’s crass, slang-filled text contains elements of his earlier works; one can imagine Brecht writing similar lines for the Berlin theater. And, Weill’s setting of the text reflects this similarity. Rather than the standard AABA form of popular American ballads, this song is in ABBABB form – closest to the German ballad’s verse-refrain structure. Its piano accompaniment is less tonal than his other

propaganda songs, particularly in the A sections where it alternates between a D minor triad and a minor-minor Bb7 on the offbeats. Like the German model, the verse is minor and the refrain is major. In fact, Weill uses an almost identical form and harmonic palate for “Und was bekam des Soldaten Weib.”

Figure 10: Form of “Schickelgruber”



A sections: minor, with boom-chuck accompaniment of “directional ambiguity”, angular  
 B sections: major, lyrical, contrasting melody

For its singer, “Schickelgruber” presents some interesting interpretive issues. Given its similarities to Weill’s German cabaret style in both music and message, is it most effective to sing it straight, square, and emotionally detached as Lotte Lenya may have? Or should one consider the intended audience of American factory workers and “schmaltz” up at least the refrain with a warmer vocal color? The former is certainly the easier choice to make, given the range, rhythm, and strictly square accompaniment – likely with good reason.

The American propaganda songs do not paint with one wide brush the way the German pieces or even the “Art Songs” do. A singer may safely approach “Nanna’s Lied” the same way they do “Barbara Song” or “Und was bekam des Soldatenweib” in terms of vocal color, phrasing, and amount of freedom. But in their English-language counterparts, each song draws from a slightly different place stylistically.

“Schickelgruber” is most like the German songs. “Walked Through the Country” and

“Buddy on the Nightshift” are closest to the style of Tin Pan Alley and would likely use a lighter vocal mechanism. The more earnestly patriotic songs, such as “Song of the Free,” are most effective using a full, classically trained voice. Together, they are a lively, versatile group that was doubtless much appreciated by their audiences of all backgrounds.



## Conclusion

Kurt Weill was clearly able to know and touch a wide range of audiences in order to achieve his ultimate goal of helping the American cause. In his American propaganda songs for factory workers, Weill used primarily American forms and techniques and applied some of his older stylistic traits where he found them suitable to the text. In his German propaganda songs, he used an older style he felt would resonate with the German audiences who knew him from his days in the Berlin theater. And in his art songs, he drew from his earliest influences as a young “serious” composer as well as the more sophisticated techniques used by several of his peers internationally. Each of these pieces was written with some sort of utilitarian purpose in mind, in keeping with both the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement of Weill’s youth and with the American commercialism with which critics have accused him. One could, as we have seen, dismiss the changes in Weill’s style after his emigration as mere opportunism. But his enthusiasm in both word and deed, as well as the subtleties with which he considered his audience and purpose, lead one to believe that Weill’s intentions of creating effective, meaningful music for his new listeners were genuine. Through his independent songs, Weill was able to successfully and indisputably negotiate his transition into an American identity.

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